

Transcendental

Robert Woolley

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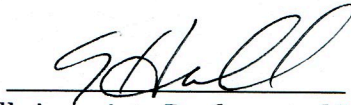
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By  
Robert Woolley  
Master of Fine Arts

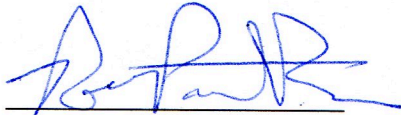
Herron School of Art & Design  
IUPUI  
Indiana University



David Morrison, Professor of Printmaking  
Advisor



Greg Hull, Associate Professor of Sculpture  
Committee Member



R. Patrick Kinsman, Lecturer of Art History  
Committee Member

Accepted: May 2012

\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Valerie Eickmeier  
Dean of Herron School of Art & Design

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



“The past exists only in our memories, the future only in our plans. The present is our only reality. The tree that you are aware of intellectually, because of that small time lag, is always in the past and therefore is always unreal. Any intellectually conceived object is always in the past and therefore unreal. Reality is always the moment of vision before the intellectualization takes place. There is no other reality.” (Pirsig, 247)

The world comes to us through our senses. Sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste allow us to bridge the gap between the physical elements that exist in this universe. This physical interaction solidifies and confirms our reality. How do we know we are really ourselves and not some figment of our own imaginations? Quite simply, because we can see, hear, feel, etc.

But what happens when our senses break down and fail to properly inform us of our surroundings? When moments of overwhelming sensation are too much to bear? We are consumed. Intellectually stuck in between our known realities and something else.

These experiences are pure sensation, a state of being rather than knowing. On the one hand they confuse, bewilder, and unsettle. On the other hand they inspire and stimulate. Within these fleeting moments there exists an understanding of the potential for something more. It is here that we have the ability to transcend reality and consider the beyond. This is sublime.

This thesis project represents my personal investigations on the concept of sublimity. It is an attempt to answer the question: What is sublime?

Throughout my exploration I have determined that the key to understanding the sublime lies within one's ability to understand themselves. As stated before, the sublime exists as a pure sensational experience. Because of this, there is no finite definition that can pin it down. You alone determine and define your relationship to the sublime.

Thomas Weiskel states: “The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and speech, transcend the human. What if anything lies beyond the human – God or the gods, the daemon or Nature – is matter for great disagreement. What, if anything, defines the range of the human is scarcely less sure.” (Weiskel, 3)

This thesis body of work focuses on illustrating the division between the known and unknown. It has been divided into six sections (*Expanse, Atmosphere, Horizon, The Air Above, Still, and Passage*), each representing a different response to my concept of sublimity. A central focus within these series of works, however, is my attempt to make visible the moment of transcendence. This instance is illustrated by the use of barriers and constructed space: The horizon line defines the ground from the sky. Placing a video in the ceiling of a constructed corridor defines a viewer’s experience. Repetition of a few frames of a video image narrows the focus onto a split second in time. Within all these works I am attempting to construct immersive visual experiences that allow the viewer a moment of pause and consideration.

In order to provide some perspective on my contemporary relationship with the sublime I feel it is important to take a brief survey of its history. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word sublime means: “of very great excellence or beauty”. (Sublime) As stated before, you cannot truly define the sublime. This definition does nothing to provide us with a true understanding of the sublime experience. It does, however, provide a record of the origin of the word. It is derived from Latin *sublimis*. Sub meaning ‘up to’ and limis referring to ‘limit’. (Sublime)

The concept of sublimity was first introduced by an unknown author commonly referred to as Longinus in perhaps the first or third century A.D. in his writing *On the*

*Sublime*. He saw the sublime as evidence of mans ability to transcend his own limits.

Through the arts (specifically writing), he thought certain people were capable of transcending themselves.

“Longinus had declared that true nobility in art and life was to be discovered through a confrontation with the threatening and unknown, and drew attention to anything in art that challenges our capacity to understand and fills us with wonder.” (Morley, 14)

This idea of “challenging our capacity to understand” is a significant component of the sublime experience. It is in part what makes us human. Our ability to question our existence and our knowledge of the world around us is fundamental in the progression of science, art, theory, and the human race as a whole.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century a great influx of philosophical ideas spread throughout Europe. Philosophers such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant dissected and re-interpreted the concept of sublime. In Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) he suggests that sublimity comes out of astonishment of natural things.

“The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.” (Burke, 95)

Burke tells us that the notion of the beautiful (in this case nature) and sublime are related but not synonymous. The apprehension of experiencing a vast landscape, while standing atop a mountain, for example, is so immense that it exceeds ones ability to comprehend. Because of this uncertainty, Burke cites the state of sublimity as a horrifying

experience. With this in mind, the concept of sublime can be utilized to relate a wide range of experiences.

Contemporary perceptions of the sublime have extended beyond our relationship with the natural world. New philosophies have provided us with the ability to peer deeper into the depths of contemporary culture while new technologies allow us to peer into the depths of the known universe. Through this “technological sublime” our explorations of the conceptual and physical allow for a new set of sensibilities concerning notions of sublimity. (Morley, 20)

### *EXPANSE*

The set of prints collectively entitled *Expanse* comes out of a life spent living in the Midwest where rural scenes of fields, hillsides, and vast stretches of nature make up the geography. As a child I use to go on family road trips around Kentucky and Southern Indiana. The most distinct memory of these trips isn't time spent at our destination, but the car ride to it. I remember



sitting in the back seat of my parents yellow 1986 Volvo 240 dl station wagon. From my seat I would stare out the window into the landscape as it raced by. Perhaps fueled by boredom and a lack of entertainment I thought about what was out there. What else was there past the horizon?

Reflection upon these experiences has helped in the initial development in my understanding of the concept of what I can identify as sublime. In this case the act of sitting and starrng out the car window is not evidence of a sublime experience but evidence of the innate curiosity of the world around us that exists within everyone. This series of work references the landscapes I remember seeing as a child when embarking on these road trips.

This idea of looking out at the breadth of the environment is nothing new. It reflects back on 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century sublime landscape paintings that show the power and awe of nature. Joseph Mallord William Turner is an artist who was able to capture scenes expressing nature in its intensity, fury, and majesty. Rather than depict a more static composition of a storm that can be viewed as an object, Turner gives us something more dynamic. He generates an immersive scene that allows the viewer to be a part of. In his painting *A Disaster at Sea* (1835), Turner shows the power of a raging storm overpowering a boat, tossing its passengers into the ocean. The figures disappear into the sea as they are consumed by its power.

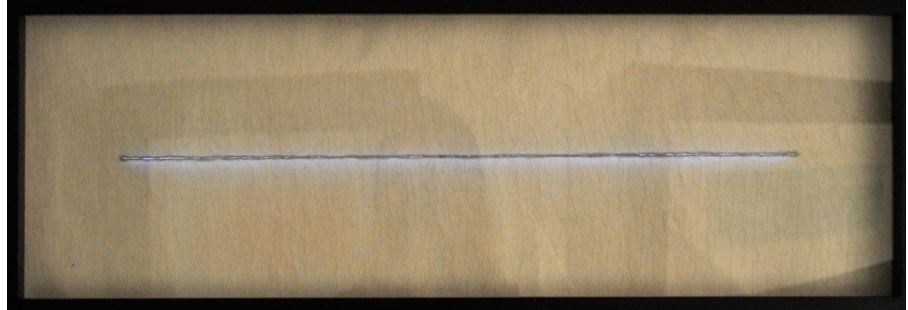


Wonderment and curiosity is a central aspect of the sublime. Nature provides us with a basic visual reference for instigating this curiosity of the unknown. By simply looking and considering one is able to expand upon their relationship with the environment around them. What lies beyond the horizon is unknown. Something is out there. We just don't know what.

## *HORIZON*

The series of mix media constructions entitled *Horizon* takes the idea of the beyond as represented through abstract landscape a step further. In these pieces I am focusing on idea of a horizon line. In

a landscape this line is the point where sky and ground meet, a liminal



intersection between space and earth, the unknown and the known. This body of work begs the question: what lies beyond the horizon?

These pieces are made by burning a thin line down the center of a sheet of paper. Hidden behind this assembly and contained within the framework is an electroluminescent light that is controlled by a custom programmed micro controller (Arduino). The light pulsates at roughly 60 times per minute corresponding to the resting heart rate of an adult



human. As the light pulsates it subtly pierces through the opening. It suggests that there is indeed something that exists past the horizon. The beyond, though still unknown, is now visible.



It is more than a dull static abyss. Perhaps it is alive?

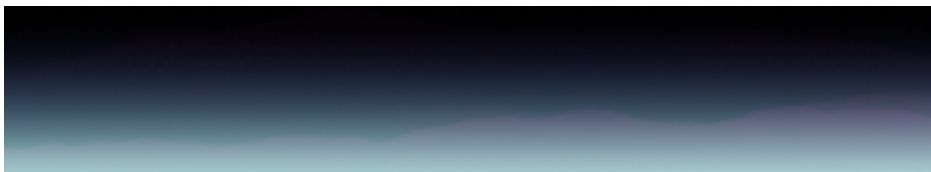
An artist that has influenced this body of work is Hiroshi Sugimoto, specifically his series of seascape photographs. In this work, Sugimoto brings us two basic elements of life: air and water. There is a clear and distinct division line that intersects between the two.

For Sugimoto, these two elements allude to the mystery of life. He says: “Mystery of mysteries, water and air are right there before us in the sea. Every time I view the sea, I feel a calming sense of security, as if visiting my ancestral home; I embark on a voyage of seeing.” (Hiroshi)

The sublime allows us to consider the mysteries of the natural world and beyond. A horizon line is the meeting point between our reality and the mystery of the unknown universe.

### *ATMOSPHERE*

The set of digital prints entitled *Atmosphere* relates ideas of landscape, horizon, and a technological sublime. These prints are created from photographs taken of the Appalachian Mountains in Eastern Kentucky. Continuing to explore the horizon line as a dividing point between known and unknown space, the photographs have been digitally modified and manipulated in order to enhance this intersection.



In this  
instance the  
horizon is shown  
as a blurry

transition between two spaces. There is no clear and distinct line. The atmosphere that

contains the air necessary for life blends out into space. This can be utilized as a metaphor to suggest that the beyond exists amongst the known. It is not some isolated place that is divided and separate from us.

James Turrell is a contemporary artist whose work has been described as both “transcendent” and “sublime”. He has created numerous installations that utilize light and space in order to define a viewer’s perception of their environment. I am particularly intrigued by his skiescapes, such as *Live Oak Friends Meeting House*.

The illusion of these spaces essentially “bring the sky down to you”. (James) With this work Turrell is removing the horizon and bridging the gap between the sky and earth.



### *THE AIR ABOVE*

As Burke suggests the sublime experience “is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.” (Burke, 95) These suspended motions can manifest themselves in many various ways. As stated before it has been through the power of nature, an ever-present, unknown force that encompasses the entire natural world.



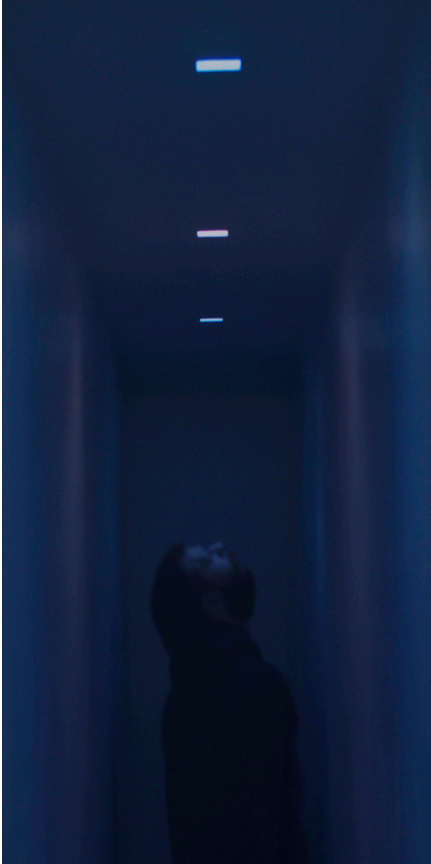
In modern society, however, we have the ability to design and fabricate things that (for me) also suggest the power and potential of life. One of these things is an internal combustion engine, more specifically, an engine attached to a purpose built racecar. These machines are designed for one purpose and one purpose alone, go fast. An engine, much like a human lung, acts as an air pump. Both intake, consume, and expel air in order to function. They are the power plants that drive their machines.

For the installation *The Air Above* I have constructed a narrow, enclosed, two-foot wide hallway. Placed in the ceiling of this corridor are three 1"x2" LCD video monitors. The monitors play digitally manipulated videos of racecars doing "burnouts". The clips have been modified and abstracted in such a way as to highlight the tire smoke produced from this activity.



The act of doing a "burnout" is a performance, a gross display of power. In this instance, the engine produces an excess of power that cannot be controlled by the tires of the vehicle. They lose traction and begin to slide against the surface of the road. This overwhelming loss of control that results from too much power is visually evident in the tire smoke produced.

This piece was partially influenced by Bruce Nauman's *Green Light Corridor* (1970). In this installation, Nauman constructs a one-foot wide corridor that is illuminated from above with fluorescent green lights. This installation challenges a viewer's perceptual and physical experiences.



By creating a narrow space and placing the videos in the ceiling I am attempting to control the viewers perspective. The corridor itself constricts a spectator's movements. In order to see the images a viewer has to crane their neck and look directly upward. This constraint coupled with the awkward viewing position heightens the viewer's perception of their presence within the space. This physical immersion within a space imposes a more full body sensational experience that is not obtained when viewing a traditional work of art. The notion of perspective based on viewing distance is negated because the piece envelops you. It consumes you.

### *STILL*

The series of digital prints entitled *Still* are screen shots acquired from videos taken during a NASCAR Nationwide Series race in the summer of 2011. The videos of the race were an early attempt to translate my personal concept of sublime as intense power. For me, attending a NASCAR race is a sublime experience. The deafening roar of the engines bombards your entire body as the cars race by at 150+ miles per hour. This particular race allows a spectator to be within feet of the cars, separated only by a waist high concrete barricade and chain-link fence.



The sensation of being this close to the furious power of these vehicles is an intense bodily experience. My initial intent was to see if I could “capture” this sensation through video and

sound. After working on these videos for a number of months I decided that they alone did not serve this concept very well. Perhaps it was the technical inefficiency of my equipment? Maybe the experience isn’t translatable in that manner?

Rather than attempt to bottle up (via a camera) and re-represent my experience in hopes that an audience will receive the same experience I decided to re-think the concept. The digital camera I am using is an image-capturing device. It records these moving images via a predetermined number of frames per second (24 in this instance). It is capturing individual moments of time and stringing them together. What if I focused on these specific moments? Each digital

print is a single frame that has been abstracted into a monochromatic color field image. They now function as abstract fleeting moments.

Individual frames of an



experience.

This work relates to Olafur Eliasson's piece *Your Strange Certainty Still Kept* (1996). In this work Eliasson utilizes strobe lights to shine upon a stream of water as it falls to the floor. The lights flash upon individual droplets of water making it appear as if they are suspended in mid air.

### *PASSAGE*



The video  
*Passage* was created  
utilizing footage taken  
of the countryside in  
Southern Indiana, some  
of the same scenes of  
rural countryside I

experienced as a child. It comes out of a response to both the prints from the series *Still* and *Expanse*. The video is a combination of twenty ten-minute segments compressed and layered on top of each other. The final video is less than a second long. It loops over and over, repeating a split second of time.

By compressing these scenes I am attempting to reinterpret the visual experience of my childhood. Is it possible to transcend through to the past?

This process of examination and re-examination is an important component of my working process. Through the examination of these questions and experiences I hope to gain a better understanding of myself and of the world around me. Reflection upon and

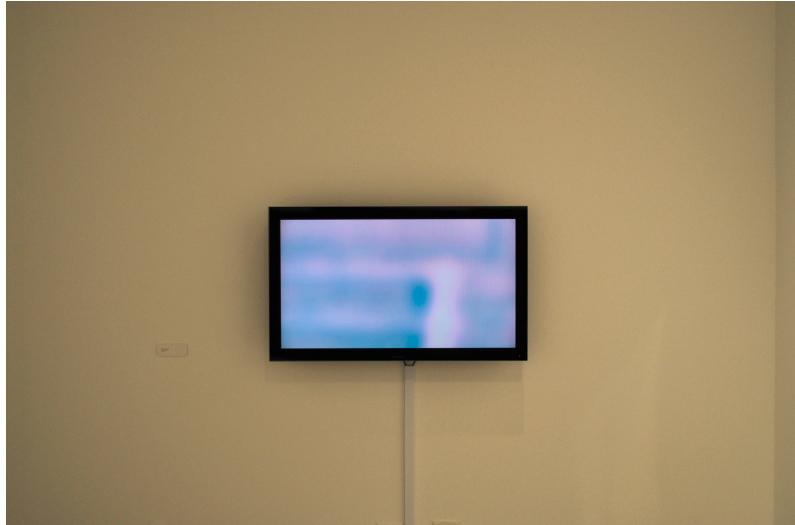
consideration of past experience is the only way to understand who you are at the present.

There is, however, never a solid answer. Pirsig says: “You look at where you're going and where you are and it never makes sense, but then you look back at where you've been and a pattern seems to emerge.

And if you project forward from that pattern, then sometimes you can come up with something.”

(Pirsig, 168)

I state before that understanding the sublime



has everything to do with understanding yourself. Uncertainty and confusion spark questions about the unknown. The sublime is what helps us question the beyond and seek the undiscovered. As Thomas Weiskel says: “Without some notion of the beyond, some credible discourse of the superhuman, the sublime founders.” (Weiskel, 3)

This body of work represents only a small portion of my interest in the concept of sublimity. It is merely a scratch in the surface of the potential that exists within the material, process, let alone the concept. Our ability to conjure up a concept such as the sublime reflects the potential contained within the human mind. It helps us want to believe in something more, something greater. It allows us to better ourselves as individuals and as a human race as a whole.

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## Image List

(Fig. 1) *Expanse*, 2012

(Fig. 2) *Expanse* (installation view), 2012

(Fig. 3) *Horizon*, 2012

(Fig. 4) *Horizon* (installation view), 2012

(Fig. 5) *Atmosphere*, 2012

(Fig. 6) *Atmosphere* (installation view), 2012

(Fig. 7) *The Air Above*, 2012

(Fig. 8) *The Air Above*, 2012

(Fig. 9) *Still*, 2012

(Fig. 10) *Still* (installation view), 2012

(Fig. 11) *Passage*, 2012

(Fig. 12) *Passage* (installation view), 2012

Rob Woolley

Image List

1. Etching (4"x6")
2. Etching Chine-colle (5"x6")
3. Etching, Chine-colle (2"x6")
4. Etching, Chine-colle (14"x14")
5. Etching, Chine-colle (2"x7")
6. Etching, Chine-colle (5"x4")
7. Etching, (8"x10")
8. Etching, Relief (8"x10")
9. Etching, Screen Print, Chine-colle (4"x4")
10. Etching, Screen Print, Chine-colle (4"x4")
11. Etching, Chine-colle (2"x3")
12. Etching, Chine-colle (9"x11")
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20. Etching, Chine-colle (12"x24")
21. Etching (6"x22")
22. Digital Print (4"x23")
23. Digital Print (22"x30")
24. Etching, Chine-colle (22"x30")
25. Etching, Relief (16"x20")
26. Etching, Relief (12"x24")
27. "Breathless", Wood, Fiberglass, Light (2'x2'x4')
28. "Event Horizon", Wood, Drywall, Light, Light Controller, Framed Etchings (8'x8')
29. "Breathe Deep", Wood, Drywall, Fiberglass, Light (Dimensions Variable)
30. "The Air Above", Wood, Drywall, LCD Screens, Video (8'x14')











